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ABSTRACT

Regardless of their marital status earlier in life, most women can expect to be single for some of their old age. In addition, older single women often have reduced resources. Many women now face situations unlike their expectations when they chose their life courses. Such a situation is shared by a unique community of Catholic sisters. Changes in the church since 1965 and societal changes resulting in fewer women entering religious life could not have been anticipated by older church members. Members (N=431) of one Catholic congregation of sisters completed questionnaires on change; attitudes toward work, aging, and retirement; life events; and resources. Personal interviews were conducted with 30 of the sisters. The results indicated that the respondents dealt with issues facing many older women today and affecting more women in the future. All sisters had had a continuous work history prior to retirement. While some respondents had held professional positions, others held nonprofessional jobs. Wages had been low and subjects were financially ill-prepared for retirement. With decreasing numbers of new members to provide security to old members, the expected care may not be available when needed. The findings suggest that experience with change through the life cycle facilitates retirement and aging adjustment. Far from being at the mercy of institutional and societal change, these women instead provide a model of successful aging. (Author/NB)

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Women's Issues

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WOMEN'S ISSUES

Regardless earlier role, most women can expect to be single for some of their old age, often with reduced resources. Many women now face situations unlike their expectations when they chose their life course. Such a situation is shared by a unique community of Catholic Sisters. Changes in the Church since 1965 and societal changes resulting in fewer women entering religious life could not have been anticipated by their elderly members. An analysis of the interaction of this community with change is the focus of this research. Results indicate that these women deal with issues facing many older women today and affecting more women in the future. All Sisters have had a continuous work history prior to retirement, some professional, some nonprofessional. Wages have been low; they are financially ill-prepared for retirement. With decreasing numbers of new members to provide security to old members, the expected care may not be available when needed. Results suggest that their experience with change through the life cycle facilitates retirement and aging. Far from being at the mercy of institutional and societal change, these women instead provide a model of successful aging.

Women's Issues

The purpose of this paper is to present a model of coping with change for future generations of women. It has been said that aging is a woman's issue. Change, too, can be identified as a woman's issue, especially for the woman who is older. A woman has greater longevity than a man and often spends her later years alone even if she had once been married. Her changing roles have a major effect on the aging process. Until the last few decades the central organizing paradigm for the study of women's roles has been that women's place is in the home. Yet women's entry into the labor force, the rising divorce rate, and the growing numbers of older women who live alone have restructured the fifties' view of the nuclear family with the man as the instrumental leader and the woman as the expressive leader (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Even those women who graduated from college in the 1950's have drastically altered their life course to become part of a cohort with higher continuous rates of participation in the labor force than any women their age in American history (Giele, 1982). Often within a single lifespan, these women have experienced several different types of life situations that may include varying marital conditions and occupational levels. For women also, both the predictable and accidental nature of major life events create great stress and

thus affect a woman's sense of her ability to control her destiny and leave her with a lower sense of personal efficacy (Duncan & Morgan, 1980). Women today have a very different role from what they most likely expected when they were younger.

So it is also for women religious in the Catholic Church. Their role today is quite different from what they might have expected when they were called to their vocation. They, too, have experienced more uncertainty and less stability in their lives than they could have ever anticipated.

Catholic Sisters and Change

In 1965, Vatican II called for the renewal of religious life and encouraged all religious orders to analyze goals and structures and effect necessary changes (Ebaugh, 1977). Dialogue and communication among all groups and individuals in the order, and availability and service to secular society were central themes. In this process of adapting and becoming open to the world, convents restructured many of the mechanisms which had been used to create a sufficient distance from society so that total commitment could be given to achieving religious goals. As a result of Vatican II, many distinctions between religious and laity were reduced. Regulations were liberalized and contact with seculars was positively stressed as the way in which a religious could fulfill her role and mission. The structures that separated sisters from the outside world disappeared. Sisters dressed like lay counterparts, worked alongside of career

and married women, chose where they wanted to work and with whom they wanted to live, gained a degree of financial independence from the larger order, and in many instances were not even recognized by their coworkers as sisters (Ebaugh, 1977).

In reducing the status differences that distinguished the sisters from the laity, some of the symbolic rewards that were previously associated with the role of sisters disappeared. Ironically, in the very effort to make life less difficult for women religious and more rewarding and in tune with contemporary conditions, more and more women left their orders; at the same time, fewer and fewer young women were entering religious life. The end result has been that the numbers of sisters within the congregations have been drastically reduced. With no younger ones entering, the average age of the group has greatly increased, and concerns have become focused on those of an aging population (Ebaugh, 1977; Strain, 1974).

Even though many sisters have spent a lifetime devoted to a calling or a vocation, it is obvious that as sisters have aged they have encountered great change in their lifetimes. Nor has the propensity for change been altered with the passage of time. For many of them who are aging, more change is still in the offing; the change from being an active, productive sister to one that is now retired is imminent. These sisters are reluctant to retire because retirement renders them useless in their own eyes. Even though a religious vocation is lifelong, many women religious today equate vocation and avocation as synonymous. A

lifetime spent in a particular profession has created a tendency to validate self worth in terms of that role and to give up that work role is to become useless (Strain, 1974).

A challenge to the Catholic congregation of sisters and, indeed, to society itself, is the need to develop and institutionalize roles or activity substitutes to replace the important components associated with work. Looking at aging sisters and all aging women as groups at risk because of changes and environmental stresses places the onus on the institution and on society to reduce the impact of retirement and to develop substitutes for work-related activities and for other role changes and losses that occur.

This paper will describe one congregation as it is today and its reaction to change with a focus on the strategies that have been developed to help its members cope with the changes that are occurring in their lives. It is hoped that the study will provide some understanding for the large numbers of older, unmarried women in the future who will have longer and longer work histories and who will doubtless have much change in their lives.

Description of the Congregation

Research method

All of the members of a Catholic congregation of sisters whose motherhouse is located in the midwest were included in this study. Initially researchers visited the motherhouse and interviewed the retirement director, the administrative team, and

a number of the sisters who were residing in either the motherhouse or the extended care facility. The second phase of data collection involved the development of an instrument which included both closed and open ended questions, with the cooperation of the administrative team. Although the primary focus of the instrument was change, questions were asked regarding the sisters' attitudes toward aging and retirement as well as about the importance of work, certain events in their lifetimes, and the availability of resources. The questionnaire was mailed to every member of the congregation who was able to respond. Out of 511 questionnaires mailed out, 431 were returned. Most of the sisters who were able did respond. Those who did not were, in many cases, incapacitated for one reason or another.

A third phase of data collection consisted of personally interviewing a sample of the sisters. Thirty interviews were conducted using a minimally structured interview schedule with broad, open-ended questions. These sisters who were interviewed represented a range of occupational and educational backgrounds and ages.

The congregation

The congregation has experienced much change in the last two decades. Like other congregations, this group has experienced a decline in growth. Declining membership has not hindered this group of women from adapting to the society in which it exists.

The congregation of sisters has striven to fulfill its ministries and change to meet the times. The increasing age of the group, the average age is 66 now, has raised serious concerns regarding the continued existence of the congregation as well as personal concerns for the older sisters as to what they can expect in their retirement. Increasing age and decreasing membership are affecting the order in several ways. Fewer sisters are able to work outside the order and bring in income, resulting in a reduction of income which is of concern to 65% of the respondents. And there are fewer sisters available to care for sisters who are aging and becoming increasingly frail and dependent. It is similar to the plight of the larger population where the dependency ratio is affecting the number of workers who will be able to support the retired.

The ages of the members of the congregation who responded to the questionnaire ranged from 33 to 96 with a mean of age of 65. Very few of the sisters are young chronologically: 17 (3.9%) are less than 40; 62 (14%) are between 40 and 50; 90 (21%) between 51-60; 96 (23%) are from 61-70; 115 (27%) are between 71-80; 43 (10%) who are from 81-90; and 5 (1%) who are over the age of 90. Ironically a sister who may be in her late thirties or early forties commented that even though she had friends in the larger society who were her age and carrying multiple responsibilities of children, family, and professional life and were considered quite capable of handling those tasks, she herself was viewed by the older sisters as not "old enough" to make certain decisions

for herself or indeed to live alone with several other sisters her age; the younger sisters needed an older, wiser head in their housing group to guide them.

The women in the congregation are highly educated. The median degree attained was that of a Master's Degree, n=163. Twenty-eight had received a Ph. D. or an Ed. D. while only 53 had achieved less than a high school diploma.

The high level of educational attainment is reflected in the occupational categories of the sisters. The sisters were asked to describe their careers over their lifetime. Over half of the sisters who responded considered themselves to be educators, n=229. They were either in teaching or in administration. Twenty-two are or were in domestic work of some type, either housework or food service. Fourteen sisters were in human services, and ten in the health care area. Others identified their careers as horticulturist, librarian, photographer, or office worker. Eighty-one of the sisters believed that they had had work tasks instead of careers in their lifetime. Some responded that they had been involved in both a career and work tasks.

The sisters were asked whether or not they considered themselves to be retired. Most of the sisters felt that they were not retired, n=351. That includes 84% of those between 66-75, 52% of the sisters between 76 to 85, and 24% of those sisters who are over the age of 85. Interestingly, however, 329 of the women had also responded that all sisters should retire but for

most retirement hinged on physical health, mental health, and desire. Although it was not statistically significant, correlations between age and the question "Should all sisters retire?" demonstrated that the younger sisters rather than the older sisters were more likely to believe that all sisters should retire. The older the respondents were the less likely they were to agree that all sisters should retire.

Slightly more than half, n=271, are in the work force and earning incomes. Only 30 sisters responded that they were not working. Correlations on these two variables with age showed that it was the younger sisters who were working and who were being paid for working. It is important to note, however, that among the older sisters who were from 76 to 85, over 84% reported that they were working, and among those who were over 85, 71% considered themselves to be working. The work ethic is very strong in this group. Even though a discrepancy exists between the numbers of sisters who say they are working and sisters who say they are retired, it is apparent that the older sisters continue to be productive, functioning members of the congregation. The older sisters may not be in the work force and earning money, but they are providing necessary support to the religious community. Such continued support is obviously behind the reluctance to claim that one is retired.

Key Issues

Mission

It is apparent by looking at the careers that these women have had over their life times that education has been a primary focus for them. Education has been a mission of this congregation for over 100 years. In that time, the congregation has founded many educational institutions such as grade schools, secondary schools, special educational facilities, and colleges. As with so many Catholic congregations today, however, this group of women is also facing a crisis in the continued existence of many of those schools. Such a situation may well be creating anxieties and doubts in this order since the membership is primarily prepared for educational service.

The changing age pyramid of the group is also affecting the primary mission of the congregation. Currently the sisters are contemplating a change of mission from working with the young to working with the old. Working with the elderly of the larger community is becoming more and more a focus for the group. The sisters are now staffing and supplying space for an adult day care facility on the grounds of the motherhouse. In addition, they are teaching workshops about aging.

Changes

Such a major shift in focus for the mission reflects the concern the sisters are expressing regarding the aging of the membership of the congregation as well as the aging of members of the general population. For the remainder of this paper, the

primary emphasis is directed toward the changes that are occurring regarding aging and the adjustments that are being made to accommodate those changes. Two questions will be addressed: 1) What strategies have the sisters utilized in coping with these changes? and 2) What resources are used in this process?

The major change that has been selected for analysis is the transition of the sisters into the extended care facility from whatever residence group she had been in before. The researchers who originally visited in the motherhouse noted an emphasis on transitions in this congregation and the special effort that was made by the congregation as a whole to assist any member in going through these transitions. This subsequently became an area of interest in the instrument that was developed for the mailed survey.

Changing living arrangements has been a major event in the past year for 140 of the respondents. Such a change affects all the sisters, but it has a greater impact on those who are older. One important transition occurs when a sister moves from the mission to the motherhouse, and another even more traumatic transition occurs when that sister then moves from the motherhouse into the health care facility which is located on the motherhouse grounds. All of the sisters are strongly motivated by their desire to work and to be productive members of the community. The work ethic is very strong in this group as it appears to be in most Catholic congregations or orders of sisters (Hickey & Kalish, 1969; Strain, 1974). A working member

contributes economically to the entire congregation; a nonworking member is believed to serve in other ways. Yet for some sisters, it is quite difficult to give up their independence and freedom to live in a more controlled environment. It is even more difficult when loss of mobility and increasing frailties precipitating that move lock that individual into a contracting and confining situation. That is particularly true in this congregation where the older the sister is the more she believes that her health limits her work. The correlation between age and health limitations was very strong (Gamma =.70). All of this is further compounded by the fact that a large number of the sisters are concerned about the reduction in financial resources of the community. The older sisters reported that they were quite disturbed by this event.

The sisters themselves agree that retirement should occur and that it should depend on both physical and mental health. When asked whether sisters should retire, the sisters responded in several ways: yes=61, depends on physical health=125, depends on mental health=69. Only 91 of the sisters responded no. Earlier studies also indicated that sisters believed that retirement was inappropriate, except for reasons of health (Coralita, 1968; McKinnon, 1964).

To the sisters, retirement means that there will be more time for relaxation, prayer, and to help other sisters. Prayer is important to many of the sisters, but as Strain (1974) suggests if a woman was not called to a contemplative order

initially when she was young, she probably does not receive this calling when she is in her seventies or eighties. And as prevalent as the work ethic is to this group, it is even more difficult to turn to the contemplative life when there is financial need in the congregation.

Meaningful activity is important to a person who has been an educator or administrator most of her adult life. For those sisters who consider themselves retired and that is only 74 of the respondents. their activities have included helping others, lighter work activities, leisure activities such as reading, hobbies, and crafts. Resting and doing things they always wanted to do were also listed as activities. Prayer was mentioned by a number of the sisters, but it was almost always mentioned in conjunction with something else. The congregation itself has assisted the retired sisters in a number of ways. The retired sisters said that they had had their health and spiritual needs cared for, that in many cases they had been encouraged to work part time, that they had been given support in many ways, that housing and activities had been provided for them. Only three felt that the congregation had not been helpful to them in their retirement.

Interestingly, when all the sisters were asked what things they felt the congregation could do to improve the situation for the retired sisters, 121 responded that no more could or should be done. Others felt that more could be done but what could be done varied considerably. It generally dealt with allowing more

choice and options for the retired sisters and also with better preparation for the retirement period itself. The ambivalence the sisters feel regarding retirement seems to be expressed by the responses to an attitude item which stated that "The retired have little to contribute". The feelings were quite mixed: 246 disagreed with the statement but only 50 strongly disagreed, 63 were undecided, and 75 agreed that the retired had little to contribute. This would certainly suggest that those respondents who felt that all the sisters needed more assistance with the process of retirement were quite accurate in their judgement. Those who are retiring or soon to retire need to be helped to realize that no longer working does not mean they are useless.

The results of the mailed questionnaire are very similar to the observations of the researchers on their initial visit to the motherhouse. The aging of the congregation was very evident, but such a problem is not unique to these sisters and applies to all of the aging population in the United States. No one wants to give up his/her independence and gradually lose control over life. What makes this situation unique is the assistance that the sisters receive in making the transition.

The researchers observed one sister in particular as she was being assisted to make the transition to the health care facility from the motherhouse. Several things seemed to be occurring. Several persons who had been interviewed had directed the researchers to Sister A. Each suggested that she was one person the researchers really needed to talk with before leaving the

grounds. Interest in the project was apparent, but it appears that the suggestions were prompted by other motives. Part of the strategy in helping Sister A. cope with the change was to encourage visitors with whom she could share her life experiences. The team visited with Sister A. for almost an hour in her room. She talked very openly about her present situation, her feelings when she felt she needed to move there, and her life since she had become a sister. There was no doubt that she had spent much time reflecting about these things and in dialogue about them with others. While the research team visited with her, three other visitors stopped to see her but went on their way when they saw that she was busy. The researchers later realized that this was no coincidence, but a carefully coordinated approach to dealing with transition.

The coordination was directed by a pastoral team of members of the congregation consisting of several sisters and a priest, some of whom have had formal training ranging from six months to one year in a program called Clinical Pastoral Experience. The team meets and works with each person who has a special need. Seven members make up the team; they include a priest, the three residence coordinators (one from the extended care facility and two from the motherhouse) and three part time workers. Their primary function is to listen and to service any need the sister might have. For example, a member or members of the team might stay with a sister while she is having surgery and coming out of it. The need of the sister determines who in the pastoral team

will work with her and what that process will include. The transition of Sister A. from the motherhouse to the extended care facility was smoothed by the efforts of this team. They worked with her, listened to her, and helped keep her involved in her normal activities as long as possible. Sister A., who was in her eighties, had been directing a continuing education program for the congregation prior to her admission to the health care facility. She was still performing that task when she was visited by the research team, and it was understood that she would continue to do so until she was no longer able.

It is obvious both from the observation data and the empirical data that a concerted and organized effort has been made by the sisters to encourage retiring sisters that they still retain control over their lives. The sisters remain a viable part of the community and though many are still trying to come to terms with deteriorating health, they function and contribute to the congregation in a meaningful way.

Facilitation of this transition for retiring sisters is just one example that was observed of the model of caring that was so vividly portrayed in this community. Further it is an example of meeting the challenge to the Catholic congregations to develop and institutionalize roles or activity substitutes to replace the important components associated with work. Such a model could easily be transferred to other organizations and institutions beyond this congregation.

Summary and Conclusions

This is just one way in which the research team has observed the functioning of the model of care that is present in this congregation. The sisters have recognized certain areas where support is needed for their members who are making major transitions. Support is being provided in various ways as suggested by the empirical data and by the example that was given. The strategies are to find where the need is and to utilize the resources that are available. The most important resources in the congregation are the sisters themselves--regardless of age.

The model is significant for the larger society and for future generations of women, since they comprise and will continue to comprise the majority of the aging population. Specifically, as in the case of the situation that was described here where an older sister moved to a different living arrangement, resources can be utilized to facilitate that move. Seeing that the older person is not isolated and that she can continue to have contact with many people from both inside and outside of that facility is important. The outside visitors seem to be very important in this situation. When a visitor is from outside, it is tangible proof that the new resident is still considered part of the visitor's life and is valuable enough for the visitor to make the effort to come to see her. The outside person brings a sense of the larger world with them. The life

space of the new resident does not appear to have diminished as much as might otherwise have seemed.

Utilizing a team concept of support from within that community is also essential to this model. Each individual has different needs which no one person is able to adequately fulfill. With a team approach, the need or the task to be performed can correspond to the skills of a particular individual on the team thus functional specificity can be maintained.

Further, encouraging the resident to continue to fulfill positions or functions outside that institution can also be important to well-being. That includes the well-being of the congregation as well as for the individual. Because an individual has moved to a more sheltered type of living arrangement does not mean that all of her abilities have automatically disappeared. We, as a society, are too ready to allow those considerable resources that older people have to go to waste. Abilities and skills that are used are maintained far better than those which are not used. It is strongly suggested that this model of caring be emulated by the larger society in as many ways as possible. For our society to function as it too becomes increasingly aged, available resources must be utilized. As in this case where almost 98% of the women between 66 and 75, 84% between 76 and 84, and a phenomenal 71% over the age of 90 consider themselves to be working, the larger society must recognize the skills of the aging and allow them to be useful and productive partners. No where does the concept of mutual

dependence seem more appropriate than with these sisters who are mutually dependent on one another regardless of age and who have a truly collegial relationship with one another.

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